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ABOUT TO GET  
LAID...

...TO  
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# ESCAPE FROM INCEL ISLAND!

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# Chapter One

They don't call me Mankiller Jones for nothing. They call me Mankiller Jones because I tell people that's my name and I throw kind of a fit if anyone calls me anything else. Honestly, I have a feeling most people call me Shirley behind my back. Or Mx. Jones if they're feeling formal.

It doesn't bother me too much what people call me, because I'm never around to hear it. I'm always too busy infiltrating and exfiltrating the deadliest places on Earth. "War and disaster" would be my middle name if I hadn't already legally changed my middle name to Danger. I only feel alive when I'm surrounded by the dead, the dying, and the people who don't know they're about to find themselves in those categories. I only feel alive in the hottest of hot spots.

Spots like Incel Island, which inched over the horizon to greet us just as the sun rose behind us. It was smooth flying, our octocopter equipped with all the newest and finest stabilization the US Army could afford.

Get in, get the data off the computer, get out. Save the world. Just another job.

My passenger, Dr. Helena Morrison, looked uneasy. I hadn't gotten a read on her yet. About a decade younger than me, I'd guess, somewhere in her mid-twenties. Which means she'd finished her PhD damn fast. Computer types were like that these days, and Dr. Morrison was definitely a computer type, down to the slightly old-fashioned blue hair and the practically gauche black T-shirt emblazoned with some coding reference I didn't get.

"It'll be fine," I said.

"We'll be the first women they've seen in what, five years?"

"Yeah." I guess I felt like enough of a woman that day to not want to correct her.

"How's it going to be fine?" she asked.

One hand still on the stick, I rested the other on the assault shotgun on the floor between our seats. Kel-tec KSG. "It'll be fine."

Ten minutes later, I set down the octo on Gateway Rock three miles offshore. No ships, planes, rotos, or even drones were allowed on or over Incel Island proper; supplies and the occasional official visitor all passed through the tiny, lifeless Gateway Rock. There was no staff—none could be trusted not to help the prisoners escape. Automated turrets spun to turn their gaze and barrels on us as we made our way to the rowboat.

Dr. Morrison didn't complain, not verbally. The look on her face communicated her fear and disgust clearly enough.

"There've been seventeen escape attempts in the five years of the project," I answered, even though she hadn't asked. "Can't let them get hold of even a motorboat."

"It just seems inhuman," Dr. Morrison said.

We strapped on life vests and stepped into the boat.

"Sure," I said. "That's probably true."

Our contact stood on the dock, waiting for us. A young white guy, less than thirty, with a machete strapped to his belt. He was shirtless and tan and he was clearly showing off his decent physique. The stubble looked alright on him, but he needed to fire his hairdresser because shaggy hair can be done right but he hadn't done it.

Sir Donald Lazlow IV, Esquire. That's what his entry in my dossier said his name was. Who was I to judge someone based on some pretentious name they'd chosen for themselves?

"Miss Jones?" he asked Dr. Morrison in a cloying voice, clearly ignoring me to focus on my younger and slightly more feminine companion.

"Imma just call you Duckie, then," I said as I stepped out of the boat. "Like Donald Duck." I stood to my full five foot ten, my shotgun held casual at my side.

"My name is Sir Donald—" Words crawled out like slugs from the cave of his mouth.

"Duckie."

"Heya, Ducks!" Dr. Morrison said as she joined us on the docks.

"That right there is Dr. Morrison," I said, "with whom you will not be on a first name basis."

The dock was a reasonably modern affair, wood decking held afloat by pontoons. A few scattered fishing boats—some old, some homemade, none equipped with sails or motors—filled up most of the available space. On shore, a couple dozen makeshift houses constituted a fishing village.

"Alright," Duckie conceded, "Dr. Morrison, Miss Jones."

"Mankiller," I supplied. "Call me Mankiller, Duckie."

"That's offensive," he replied.

I mean, he was probably right. Incel Island was, at the end of the day, an open-air prison.

"Come, my lady, let us walk," Duckie said. He reached out and touched Dr. Morrison on the upper arm. In one instant, she recoiled bodily, I drew a combat knife from my belt and stepped forward, and Duckie... hissed. Like a vampire at a cross.

The next moment, calm had returned.

"My apologies, Dr. Morrison," Duckie said. "I only meant to direct your attention to—"

"I don't give a shit what you meant to do," Morrison said. I liked her more and more.

"You snarled," I said.

"Human nature," Duckie said, waving his hand as if to bat away a fly. "Men are creatures of testosterone, there's no helping that."

"I know plenty of men who don't snarl when they don't get their way," I said.

"History would not be made by such men, I'm sure. Those of us on the island have suffered greatly. We were promised women, and were given only each other."

"The real treasure was friendship all along," I suggested.

"You're mocking me."

"You're astute."

We stared at one another, sizing each other up, until an air raid siren cut through the silence. It was far away, somewhere up in the trees on the hill behind the beach.

"I'm afraid we have to hurry," Duckie said calmly. "They'll be here soon."

You don't really argue with a statement like that. In fact, you usually don't even have time to ask for clarification. I didn't like him. I didn't trust him. I also didn't have any

better ideas, so we followed him off the dock and into—and through—the village.

Four men in their late twenties joined us as we made our way to the hills. All bore bare blades. All stared at the trees around them. Some were nervous, some were intent. The air raid siren stopped. Maybe that should have helped my mood, but it didn't. Someone had sounded the alarm, presumably because we'd arrived. Someone was after us. Someone Duckie was afraid of.

There were no guns on the island, I'd been assured. I'd wanted a rifle, of course, but General Albion himself insisted that I take nothing with an effective range over a hundred yards. So there I was with my KSG. Two tubes, each with six shells, plus one in the chamber. A lot for a shotgun. Not much for a gun fight. Probably enough for the five men escorting us, if they turned on us. Probably not enough for whoever it was we were running away from.

Of our escorts, one man had a machete like our host. Another had a crusader's long sword. The other two bore katanas. I'd heard about that. The very first care package airdropped onto the island had been full of every conceivable melee weapon. The second care package had been full of condoms.

They came streaming in from the woods before we were through the village. Scores of them, hundreds of them, screaming. Faces painted with mud and blood. Axes, maces, swords. A man with a Klingon bat'leth strode out from a fishing hut—I think he was on our side, in the grand scheme of things—and cut another man across the chest before being laid low with a baseball bat full of nails.

After that, it was carnage.

"They're here for you," Duckie said. There was no resentment in his voice. He was just stating the facts. "They're here to kill you."

We ran through the maelstrom. One man came too close, and while I was busy trying to figure out which side he was on, Dr. Morrison kicked him in the shin hard enough that something cracked. We kept running.

Behind the village to a stand of trees, then deeper into the forest we ran.

We reached a bare rock wall, and Duckie put up his fist in a vague imitation of the military hand signal. We stopped.

He looked nervously around to make sure we weren't being observed, then put both hands on an outcropping of stone. It shifted and a door swung open. As we passed inside, I looked more closely: fiberglass, painted like stone. Clever. I mean, the path up to the door was obvious, because the incels hadn't done a good job of disguising it. But the door, probably left by the military, had been hidden well.

"We'll be safe in here," Duckie said as we made our way down a corridor lined with flickering fluorescent tube lighting. Old. Definitely a remnant of the military base.

Not thirty feet in, we reached what was left of a steel door. It had been hacked apart, crudely, and half-ripped off its hinges.

"Alright," I said, as the men took seats in folding metal chairs in the room beyond. One was offered to me, but I refused it. Dr. Morrison looked at me and followed my lead. "Tell us what's going on."

There were two other doors in the room. Two other exits. That was good.

"It's the King," one man said. Once he was sitting, I realized he was wearing a shirt with no pants. I should have saved the Donald Duck insult. Or maybe not insulted them at all. It was hard to tell.

I waited. Silence is better than questions for getting people—especially men like these—to explain things.

“Harold Dickson. The King of Incel Island,” Duckie said. “Had a coronation and everything. A year ago. After the care package with the solid gold crown in it.”

The care packages really weren’t all that caring.

“There are three big factions on the island, roughly,” Duckie went on. “King Harold, he’s got almost a thousand men up at the top of the mountain. Headquartered in the old military base. Kingsmen are the meanest motherfuckers on the island. They’re the ones who sounded that siren, who we’re hiding from right now. Harold takes tribute from the rest of us.”

“Kill him,” I suggested.

“You think we haven’t tried?”

“You’re alive, aren’t you? And so is he? You haven’t tried hard enough.”

“It’s not that simple,” the pantsless man offered.

“Then there’s the volcels,” Duckie said. “Cucks to a man. Vows of celibacy, as if that even meant anything here. They don’t cuss, either. Don’t drink. They’ve got this religious thing going on, they say being here is part of God’s plan. Free from temptation.”

“How many of those hippies?” I asked.

“Another thousand,” Duckie said. “Then there are another five hundred or so people assembled into smaller groups. Then there’s us. We’re the nice guys. We want off the island, to go back to society.”

“There’re twenty-five hundred betas?”

“Five hundred.” He didn’t argue the beta thing.

“Five thousand people were quarantined on this island,” I said. “Between Harold’s Mean Motherfuckers and the volcels and the betas, that only accounts for twenty-five hundred people”

“We told you,” the pantsless man said, running his finger along the flat of his long sword, “we tried to kill Harold.”

“Oh. I guess you really did.”

“It’s horrid, really,” Dr. Morrison said. “I mean, I’m constitutionally incapable of feeling bad for anyone who calls himself a nice guy, but that still sounds rough.”

“The imprisonment of five thousand men for the ‘crime’ of being sexually shunned will one day be seen as the greatest human rights abuse in history,” Duckie said, looking at his feet. It almost worked. I almost felt sorry for him.

Then he looked up at Dr. Morrison, hunger in his eyes.

“Every single one of you came voluntarily,” I said.

“Under false pretenses!” He stood up and started pacing in tight circles around the others.

I laughed. Maybe that was cruel, I don’t know. Whatever. “You were promised a woman. Like we’re fucking property.” For some reason I identify more strongly as a woman when it comes to shit like this.

“Anyone who signed up to move to an island where they get a free woman on arrival deserves to be here,” Dr. Morrison said. Apparently less than an hour on the island was enough to harden her position. That made sense.

“Believing we’re owed sexual satisfaction as a public good isn’t itself a crime!”

We had to be careful. We couldn’t push him too far, or I’d have to kill him. And I

needed him. Sort of.

"I mean, you're right," I said. "It's probably hypocritical how little I care."

He clenched and unclenched his fists. "It's just..." Duckie said. "It's just a sensitive subject, is all."

"All that's besides the point," Dr. Morrison said. "At least to us. The military, when it left, forgot some sensitive information. They need it back."

We shouldn't have told him all of that. But Duckie only nodded. I suppose he'd been briefed as such.

"These hallways are part of the labyrinth underneath the army base. I'll guide you," Duckie said.

"Nah," I said. "Just point the way. Don't trust you."

"You'll need us to get past the CHUDs," Duckie started. "They—"

He was interrupted by a deafening explosion from back the way we'd come, amplified by the long corridor between us and the blast.

The pantsless man was the first to the hallway, peering into the dust and rubble that now filled it.

"They're coming!" he shouted. There wasn't much room to swing his long sword, but he held it at the ready in front of him, making the best use of the space available. "I'll slow them down."

Duckie ran to one of the other doors and threw it open. "Quick," he said. The others filed through into the darkness beyond. I looked at Dr. Morrison. She was afraid, sure, I could see it in the way her eyes kept darting back towards the entrance, but she was handling her shit. That was good. She went through. I turned and saw our pantsless protector lunge forward in a perfect thrust that was answered with a spray of blood.

"Leeeeeeroy Jenkins!" he screamed, at the top of his lungs, then ran into the entry hall at the enemy.

There are some good nice guys in this world after all.

I turned back and stepped into the dark hallway, now lit by flashlights running down the tunnel ahead of us. I clicked my own on, Duckie bolted the door shut, and we ran.

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I'm not old enough to have seen the movie CHUDs, but I know it's a horror movie and it stands for Cannibalistic Humanoid Underground Dwellers. I also know it became a slur for basement-dwelling neckbeards, then evolved into a slur for right wing wannabe military types.

So when we ran through a room lit by the glow of a hundred computer screens, some showing pornography, some showing video games, some showing pornographic video games, I wasn't surprised. The samurai swords didn't surprise me either.

The bones, though. The human ones, with the teeth marks? The hand dangling out from the edge of a George Foreman grill? The guy hanging from a meathook, still freshly dead oh god I hope he was dead?

That was some fucked up shit.

I solemnly swear to never call anyone who lives in a basement a CHUD again. I've met the real CHUDs.

Three of them got up from their consoles and beelined for us as we sprinted through the room. Each looked like the worst person you'd ever seen at a 7-Eleven slushy counter



at three am, each somehow worse than the others. A thin man with a spiked flail and a t-shirt with a wizard on it; a heavy man with two long knives and a creepy smile of white, perfect teeth; a sword-wielding man whose form and face were completely hidden behind the unruliest black beard I'd ever seen and a scarred and dented viking shield.

One of our guards got the flail guy through the belly, and Duckie expertly squared off with the dude-eating Viking dude. Knife guy, though. Fuck, knife fights are no fun. I shot him in the head. It sort of exploded a little.

I pumped the shotgun, but only twelve more shots and twenty-five hundred incels on the island? While the Viking was sparring with Duckie, I stabbed him in the back. A bunch. Then I cut his throat.

I'm not a good person; I've never claimed to be.

The other CHUDs looked over at us and the carnage; they did the math and turned back to their computer screens. We kept running.

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We entered the base proper through an unlocked hatch in the floor of a sub, sub, sub, sub-whatever basement. Some kind of storage room, long since picked clean of everything but steel modular shelving and ripped apart cardboard boxes. We shoved everything we could on top of the hatch behind us, but they had explosives and numbers so it wouldn't hold them long.

Plus, we were now inside their base, and they knew it. It honestly wasn't looking good. But it doesn't help anyone to linger on realizations like that.

One of our katana-wielders, the one who'd faced off against a CHUD, was bleeding from the upper arm. I hadn't noticed. I should have noticed. Not, like, an empathy thing, but a situational awareness thing. I can't slip up like that.

His friend was freaking out. "We need a tourniquet."

I had a tourniquet on my belt. I actually had three—two cat 7s and a SWAT. Cat 7s are better for most things but a SWAT is better for the top couple inches of your thigh or a child or a dog. But katana guy number two didn't need a tourniquet.

"He ran a half a mile and climbed up into here. If he was bleeding bad enough to need a tourniquet, he'd be dead." I got a pressure bandage out instead from the IFAK on my waist and handed it to his friend. "We've got to keep moving. How well you know this place, Duckie?"

"This used to be ours."

"Great. Where's, I don't know, the king's office?"

"I don't think we need the office," Dr. Morrison said. "Need the server room. How's this island powered?"

"Geothermal," Duckie answered.

While they were talking, I went to the door and cleared the hallway beyond. Best thing about a bullpup shotgun like the KSG - where the action is behind the trigger - is that the overall length is shorter. Shorter gun means better angles for clearing corners.

Which turned out useful, because there were two dudes with hatchets waiting for us. One blast and there weren't two dudes there anymore, there was a dead guy and a guy running away. First rule of this kind of shit is the not-very-polite phrase "violence of action." Overwhelming force. Scares people into not fighting back.

Most gunshot wounds, you can actually keep fighting for a long-ass time before your

body knows you're dead. Bullets take people out of the fight because people give up because they know they got shot and they figure giving up is what you're supposed to do in a situation like that.

"Great," Dr. Morrison said, trying to hold onto her conversation with Duckie as I ushered everyone into the hall. "So if it's geothermal, there's plenty of power?"

"Yeah. Electricity is pretty stable."

"Good. Harder to get data off an unplugged computer. Where's the server room?"

"Last door on the left," Duckie explained, "through that room, opens up onto another hallway. Stairs at the end. Up two floors. Whole floor is computers."

I kicked open the indicated door then swept the room. There was just one guy in there. Older fellow, white hair, sitting at a table eating a microwaved hot pocket. Looked scared. Didn't even glance at his machete.

Duckie brought up his own blade.

"Don't," I said. Duckie looked at me confused. "You leave him here alive, whoever is following is going to stop to talk to him. Will buy us more time."

The man, still panic-stricken, nodded.

"Also it's wrong to kill people for the hell of it," Dr. Morrison added.

"Yeah," I agreed. "I suppose that's true too."

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We made it to the server room quick as hell, which was good because it had a pretty serious fire door that was wide open, and because we could hear an army coming for us from further up the stairwell. I slammed that door shut, pulled down a steel bar, and went to secure any additional exits.

Which there weren't any of.

The incels outside the room started banging on the door.

"We're safe for the moment," I said, which was technically true.

"Safe is a relative term," Duckie agreed.

We were in a big, open room, with drop ceilings and fluorescent lights and all the bad aesthetics of every office building I'd ever killed people in or blown up or kidnapped people out of. Some of it was low-walled cubicles, some of it was big server racks.

Dr. Morrison pulled a laptop from her bag and paced through the room before deciding on one particular stack of electronics seemingly at random. She opened up her computer, set it on top of a shelf, typed numbers off the one thing into the other thing, and then started typing even more.

"What're we looking for, anyway?" I asked. "Nuclear codes or something?"

"My best guess is some encryption key," Dr. Morrison said without looking away from her screen. "Must be something that unlocks communications. Top secret shit that they just realized they lost access to. All I got is the filename. Secret dot rar." Hacking in real life is even cooler than in the movies, because in real life it's mostly just a command line, so it's like hackers pull everything out of thin air. I watched over her shoulder while I kept one eye on the door and our escort. Our escort mostly stared at the door in abject horror.

"What I can't figure out," Dr. Morrison said as she typed, "is why they sent us."

"Because we're the best," I answered, without thinking about it.

"There've got to be men as good at our jobs as us," Dr. Morrison said. "Men could

have gone unnoticed, and just wouldn't have been in nearly as much danger."

"No one is as good as me," I said, reflexively. Then I thought it through and continued: "Well... shit, no, overestimating myself is bad practice. Is dangerous. Isn't what I would do if I were the best. Yeah, fine, there are probably men as good as me."

A voice cut in from an intercom in the ceiling. "Attention, most estimable guests. This is King Dickson, First of His Name, Lord of the Island of Displaced Men." I could hear the capitalization in his tone.

"Got the file," Dr. Morrison said. She pulled out a satellite modem and plugged it into the side of her laptop, then stared at the small device in frustration. "No signal, though. Can't upload from this deep underground."

"As you no doubt have become aware," Dickson droned on from the ceiling, "my loyal minions have you entirely surrounded. You are sixty vertical feet from the open air. There is no help coming. You are at my mercy." He waited dramatically. "Fortunately, I am merciful."

The banging stopped at the door. Duckie and his crew took a half step back but kept their blades leveled at the door.

"What's in the file?" I asked.

"It's a rar file. An archive."

"So open it. We've got a little time. I'm curious."

"Orders are to just upload the contents. It's top secret."

"Yeah I know," I said. "But what's on it? If I'm going to die down here, and let's be honest that's the way it's looking right now, I want to know what for."

Dr. Morrison typed a command. Hit enter. Waited a moment. Images started popping up on the screen.

I'm a cynical bitch, and I know it. I figured likely as not it was some files the government would be embarrassed to see. Drone strikes on civilians. Torture. Indefinite detention. Mercenary contracts.

But no.

It was sexts.

General Albion's dick pics flooded the screen, plus photos of him with a variety of women who probably could not all be his wife.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I screamed. "I'm going to die over this?"

His friends were still at the door, but Duckie was gone. Hiding, no doubt.

"It's true that I don't know what you were sent to retrieve," King Dickson continued from the ceiling. "But if you tell me, I'll let you leave. All of you. There's an intercom button by the door. Just press the little button, tell me yes, and we all live happily ever after."

"Albion afraid of getting blackmailed," Dr. Morrison said. "He sent us here because he was afraid someone would find this, use it as leverage to leave the island."

"Let them fucking have it," I said.

"What?"

"I've never gone back on a contract, not once," I said. "But fuck this. Men behaving badly. Got a whole island of men behaving badly, and you know who put them there? Fucking men. Behaving badly. I'm not going to rescue them from that. So fuck it, give King Harry Dick the files."

"I know this is not a simple decision, to betray your employer," King Dickson

continued. "But I'm afraid I insist you reach a decision in the near future. I'll give three minutes, and then I'm blowing the door and I'm afraid that might not end well for you. I'm loath to hurt women, you understand. Absolutely loathe."

"Shit," I said.

"What?" Dr. Morrison asked.

"That's why they sent people they perceive as women."

"Because they thought the incels wouldn't hurt us? That goes against all available logic and evidence."

"No. Because... look, I'd like to think the government put these men here because it was passably feminist. But it's not and everyone knows it. It created incel island because incels were killing too many women. Pandering to the male ego by pretending to protect women is like the oldest thing ever. Save the women, isolate the worst of the men, get all the votes. So if they send us here, and we die..."

"They'll have an excuse to blow up the island," Dr. Morrison finished. "Useful, since public perception is starting to change."

"We were never expected to survive."

"And you won't," Duckie said. I turned and saw him, at the end of the aisle, holding a derringer aimed at my head. "Thing is, I would have let you live. Get the data. Get it to Albion. No one would've been hurt. But the general was pretty clear: you weren't supposed to open the file. You weren't supposed to know what was on it. Now I can't let you go."

Mental math: he was fifteen feet away. He held his gun in one hand, which was dumb and implied he was untrained. It had a tiny, tiny barrel. Very inaccurate. Had probably been hidden in a thigh holster. It was aimed at my head, which from that distance was dumb. Aim center body mass if you've got any reason to doubt your aim.

I lifted my shotgun. He fired before I leveled it. Grazed my temple, which is more accurate than I expected. I shot him and he flew backwards, his second shot ricocheting off the ceiling and into a monitor on the wall.

I went over to him, broke his neck, retrieved his gun, then turned to his crew.

"Duckie tell you he was in the US government's pay?" I asked. They looked confused. "He tell you he made a deal that he kills us and he gets airlifted off the island before they blow the whole place to shit? He include you in that?"

They dropped their swords and raised their arms.

I went to the intercom, pressed the button.

"Alright," I said. "We'll give you the files, just let us go."

"No," Dr. Morrison said.

I looked at her, confused.

"If I was General Albion, I wouldn't have trusted Donald, not alone. If I was the general, I would have made a deal with the leader of every faction. Whoever kills us first goes home."

I took a deep breath. She was right.

"Alright boys," I said. "Pick up your swords."

We'd need their help, there was no getting around that.

"It's time to escape from Incel Island."





# Chapter Two

Last time, on *Escape From Incel Island*, our plucky heroes Mankiller Jones and Dr. Morrison had just infiltrated the lair of the King of Incel Island, Harold Dickson, only to discover that the top secret information they were sent to retrieve was, in fact, just some fucking dick pics. Worse even than photos of an unsolicited member was the realization that Mankiller and Morrison had been chosen less for their capacity as agents and more because, well, society sees them as women. If some women were to die at the hands of incels, the US government would have the excuse it needed to bomb the place and be done with it.

Oh, and their native guide, Duckie? He betrayed them. Now he's dead, but our heroes are trapped inside the server room, with only a few hapless Nice Guys with swords standing between them and certain doom.

How will they ever...

*Escape From Incel Island?*

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"Alright," I said. "We've got this."

I put on my best "we're not fucked, despite all available evidence" voice. I learned that voice from my public defender, who used it to prep me for my testimony right before she failed to get me off on manslaughter charges.

How was I to know that shooting out some klan members' tires on a curvy mountain road would send them toppling over a cliff to their watery doom at the bottom of a lake? It had only been a warning shot, after all... aimed at their tires...

Turns out warning shots aren't legal though, so that didn't help. Got three years and a new name.

"We're going to play dead," I said.

"That's a terrible plan," Dr. Morrison countered.

"That's true," I agreed. "Everyone, on the ground."

We had three Nice Guys left. Mr. Leroy Jenkins was dead, god rest his soul. Donald Duck was dead, thank fuck. All we had left was Skinny Blonde Katana Dude, Wounded Katana Dude, and Why'd You Pick A Machete Guy. Sizing them up, I had the most faith in Mr. Got-Stabbed even though he'd been, you know, stabbed.

"Hey, wounded guy, what's your name?" It was a little hard to talk over the noise the Kingsmen were making trying to kick in the door and murder us with pointy things.

"Kevin, ma'am."

I decided not to call him Mr. Got-Stabbed anymore. He was too polite and too about to die. Or maybe our companions were growing on me. I don't know.

"Mr. Kevin," I said. "You and me, we're waiting on either side of the door. Rest of you, on the ground. Look all dead and shit. But like, weapons kinda ready in case they

try to get stabby on you. Dr. Morrison, you get Duckie's gun." I handed her the pistol, a subcompact 9mm. Probably had five shots left.

"This is fucking stupid," said The Machete Guy. He looked kind of like He-Man, all muscly with a charming medieval looking haircut. He looked like He-Man if He-Man was a dick. "I'm not fucking pretending shit."

"Okay just hack them all up when they come in then," I said. "You're in front. Save us Mr. He-Man you're our only hope."

He laid down on the floor.

"Ow!" I shouted, banging the stock of my shotgun on the nearest steel desk. I'm not a very good actor. "Ow! Duckie why are you killing us? I thought you were our friend." More banging. Then I stopped. I took position on one side of the door, Mr. Kevin took position on the other, while Kingsmen on the other side kept kicking. I turned the door handle just enough to almost unlatch it.

The next kick threw the door open and three guys ran in.

"Too late, they're dead," one of them announced, seeing the people on the ground.

I stepped in, got him in a chokehold in the crook of my arm, shotgun jammed into his side. Mr. Kevin stepped out from the shadows like a goddamned movie ninja and got his katana up to another guy's throat. A little too close; I could see blood begin to well up under the blade.

Third guy, he turned and saw us. Another dozen at least were in the hall right outside.

"Drop your weapons or your friends are dead," I said.

"Whatever," the dude said. He raised a two-handed viking axe, preparing to bring it down on He-Man on the floor.

I shot him. He staggered back, then fell forward, axe nearly trimming He-Man's elegant helmet of hair. Mr. Kevin cut his hostage's throat. Mine, however, got away since my shotgun had been pointed elsewhere.

He didn't get far. Unwounded Katana Guy sprung to his feet and ran him through. Then he... he fucking spun his sword.

"Gets the blood off the blade," he said, while he was spinning it.

"It's not like you were about to sheathe it," I countered.

"Fine, fuck you, I just like spinning it."

The rest of the Kingsmen poured into the room, and I was kind of sad I didn't get to banter any longer.

•

"While I was partying," I said, as I limped down the hall, "you studied the blade."

The fight had gone better than I'd expected, since I'd expected to die. I'd spent half my ammo, and maaaaaaybe someone managed to fucking stab a fucking sai all the way through my goddamned foot, and Dr. Morrison was out of ammo entirely, but we'd won. Oh and He-Man was dead, may God rest his soul. But Mr. Kevin and Mr. Kohn—turned out his name was Mr. Kohn, I finally asked—had made it through unscathed and Dr. Morrison had straight up saved my life at one point.

"Fifteen dead bodies in a server room," Dr. Morrison said. "Over dick pics. Me and the general, we're going to have some words." Her hair was sort of purple now, the blue stained red with blood.



Mr. Kohn was taking us to a side exit he thought would be only lightly guarded, but it involved a lot of stairs, which wasn't fun at all. Because of the hole in my foot. Which also wasn't fun at all.

"I can't believe the hostage thing didn't work," I complained, to avoid complaining about how fast I was making myself walk despite the goddamned stigmata in my foot. The sai, still bloody, was on my battle belt stuck behind the pouch where a pressure bandage, now on my foot, had been. I had to get weight off of it soon.

"Minions don't care about minions," Mr. Kevin said. "I should have thought about that."

A voice echoed through the corridor from a distant intercom. "Hey now, girls, don't be in such a hurry to leave."

"I'm not even a girl," I complained. Apparently all I wanted to do was complain.

"What pronouns do you use?" Mr. Kohn asked.

I stared at him like he was a dog who'd just stood up on his back legs and asked about the weather.

"My sister is trans," he said, by way of explanation.

"My cousin is nonbinary," Mr. Kevin chimed in.

"They/them," I answered.

"She/her," Dr. Morrison said. "But I don't feel misgendered by they/them."

We turned down into a final hallway. The fluorescent lights above flickered off and on, off and on, and the stench of chlorine that permeated the entire base was even more overbearing.

"What are you all even doing here?" I asked at last.

Mr. Kevin thought about it. "There're two kinds of Nice Guys, I think," he said. "And like... I used to be the worse kind, before I wound up here. Complained about the friend zone. Thought girls were vending machines you put kindness tokens into to get sex out of. All that kind of shit."

"What changed?"

"I've learned more about myself in the past five years, living communally on this island, watching friend after friend die by masculine violence, than most people ever learn about themselves in their lifetimes."

"It breaks most of us," Mr. Kohn added. "It broke Lazlow." It took me a minute to realize he meant Duckie. "It broke the Kingsmen. The CHUDs. Even the volcels, in their way. Maybe it broke us too, I don't know."

Mr. Kevin kicked open a fire door at the end of the hall. Three men playing poker with nudie cards looked up. They scarcely had time to reach for the weapons stacked against the wall before we cut them down. I got one through the throat with the sai.

"Toxic masculinity," Mr. Kevin continued, as if he hadn't just sliced a man apart and watched his organs fall onto the floor. "This is an island of toxic masculinity, condensed into its purest form. But not for the reasons you might assume."

He kicked open another door. Sweet, sweet sunlight poured in.

"Here on Incel Island, we're forced into this... this echo chamber of bad ideas about masculinity," Mr. Kevin said. "We're prisoners of our own ideals of what men are supposed to be. But it's not just because of who we were before we were shipped off here, the ideas we had about women. We're prisoners of toxic masculinity because we're prisoners. Physically."

We started down a path through the woods, Mr. Kohn and I peering deep into the trees for signs of ambush.

"You know there's no such thing as an alpha wolf in the wild?" He was getting choked up. "Only in captivity. In the wild, wolves move in family packs. It's when they're locked up, when they're prisoners, that you get pecking orders. That you get all the dominance games."

Dr. Morrison put a hand on his back to comfort him. He didn't flinch, but he pulled away.

"I've spent every day for the past five years thinking about what I might say if I ever saw a woman again," he said.

"How'd you two find yourself crewed up with Duckie?" I asked. "Not with the volcels?"

"Lazlow was a good commander," Mr. Kohn said. "He kept us alive. All of the Nice Guys, he kept us alive. Kevin and I used to run independent, with a group of maybe fifteen guys. We were working on these ideas, these theories about patriarchy and captivity. Studying all the horrors of the island. Then that care package dropped a crown, the fragile peace broke, and it was crew up or die. Nice Guys were the lesser evil."

"The volcels," Mr. Kevin said, "they're... they're weird."

"How so?" I asked.

"Well, unless you want to limp all the way to the beach and get hunted down by Kingsmen or worse, then I'd say you're about to find out."

He parted the foliage in front of him and we looked out across a field to a wooden palisade. Beyond it, three stone towers covered in scaffolding rose almost thirty feet in the air. Atop one was a roughly dyed French flag. Atop the second, a red one. Atop the third, a human skeleton hung by its feet.

A gate, flanked by two guards armed with halberds, stood open and welcome before us.

•

"Bonjour, dear guests," the man said. He had a fake French accent, couldn't have been twenty-five, had shaved his head into a little friar tuck tonsure, and in stark contrast with most of the men I'd met so far on the island, he didn't look like he was trying to kill me. Hell, he didn't look like he ever tried to kill anyone. And not just in the "order my minions to do it instead" way, he just, like, actually looked kinda wimpy. The king of the volcels was kinda wimpy.

So I liked him just fine.

We stood in the courtyard of the compound, which was more tightly packed with structures than anywhere else we'd seen. One third of them were disaster relief emergency tents, one third of them were scrappy improvised structures like we'd seen on the beach, and one third of them were fairly impressive frontier buildings of wood and stone. A dozen men stood around us, but none of them appeared armed and half of them wore patchwork attempts at monk robes.

The sun was setting, which can never help but feel ominous.

"Glad to meet you. I'm Mx. Jones, this is Dr. Morrison."

"Enchanté," he said. "You can call me Pepe."

"No," I said. "I won't."

"Oh but you must understand—" he started.

"I get the reference. Pepe the Frog. Frog, French person. You pretend like you're French. So Pepe."

"But I am French," he insisted, his accent wavering in and out with his frustration.

"Okay," I said. I mean, there hadn't been any reports of foreign nationals being shipped to the island, but maybe this kid had been a mistake, or his parents were French immigrants, or he was just a liar.

"Let me extend the hospitality of New Rennes to you," he said, his accent restored and exaggerated. "You have the run of the place, and no one here will touch a hair on your head."

"No?" I asked. "Cue the speech about how you're voluntarily celibate?"

"Well..." he thought about it for a moment, visibly disappointed. "Oui. I was excited to give you that speech."

"Give us the speech anyway," Dr. Morrison humored him. "I want to hear it."

Color returned to his cheeks.

"This island, New Brittany," he started.

"Incel Island," I corrected. Dr. Morrison shot me a warning glance and I shut up. Can't go around deflating everyone's egos, I suppose.

"New Brittany is a paradise we are forging from the timbers of hell. New Rennes is its capital."

I opened my mouth to tell him you carve timber, not forge it, but Dr. Morrison gave me a death glare and I didn't say anything.

"We've been outcast from society, left to die. Worse, left to kill one another like animals. But they underestimated the power of the beta male. They underestimated our ingenuity. Our genius, our willingness to serve, our very beta-ness, is what has allowed us to thrive in these conditions. In Babylon, society had condemned us to live without the pleasures of the flesh. Now, here, on New Brittany, we can choose, as free men, to live without. Choose to embrace our nature. Choose to be free. Men, going our own way."

I didn't say anything snarky, because my willpower is that of a minor deity.

"That's cool," I said, instead. "Can you help us get to the beach? We've got to get out of here."

"We can point the way, but we will not accompany you. You are safe within our walls, but we will not fight for you."

"Honestly, this hurts me to say. Like, I got stabbed through the foot earlier today and it's gonna take months of physical therapy to heal properly and right now there's still a hole there, and that hole doesn't hurt as much as what I'm about to say. But the thing is, Mr. Frog, we need your help. Our esteemed colleagues here," I gestured to our Nice Guys, "have pointed out that the volcels represent the only power on the island that might be able to stand up to that of King uh, shit I forgot his name. It's not Hairy Dick but it sounds like Hairy Dick."

"Harold Dickson," Mr. Kohn answered.

"Yeah."

"I'm afraid we can offer you nothing but sustenance and shelter," Mr. Frog said. "We do not fight, except to defend ourselves. It is the volcel way."

"Cool well then you're all going to get killed because keeping us alive is your only hope."

His eyebrows raised in disbelief. "C'est la vie."

"No like, for real." I explained my theory about how if we die, the island gets bombed to shit, and how everyone is trying to kill us because of the bounty on our heads.

He thought long and hard on that one, stroking the few wispy beard hairs on his chin.

"Come morning," he said, "my men will escort you to the beach."

"I was thinking more like now."

"There are some things on this island more terrifying than the CHUDs, more worthy of fear than the Kingsmen. Even we could not keep you safe in the forest at night."

I looked at Mr. Kevin and Mr. Kohn, who nodded.

"Let me guess," I sighed. "Vampire LARPers? Ooh wait maybe werewolves?"

"I will not speak of it," King Frog said. "Now, there are other matters which require my attention. You may take quarters wherever you please; there is no assigned housing for anyone in New Rennes, not even myself. All I ask is that you do not share housing with any of my men. They need no temptation."

With that, he turned and walked off, disappearing into a narrow alley between two of the largest stone buildings. His retinue followed.

"I say we make for the beach anyway," Dr. Morrison said.

"It's dark," Mr. Kevin pointed out.

"Your point?"

"It's not safe," Mr. Kevin said. His voice had a tremor in it that was out of character.

"You're going to have to tell us what the fuck is going on," Dr. Morrison said. "You know that, right?"

"Predators," Mr. Kevin said.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

He sighed. "Sometimes, you go into the woods at night alone, you die. Sometimes, you go into the woods at night in groups, you all die, except they leave one man."

"Yeah yeah to tell the tale," I suggested.

Mr. Kevin nodded.

"And how do they die?"

"It's always different," Mr. Kevin said. "Poison darts, fired from what we assume are sniper rifles. Clouds of toxic gas. Razor-sharp nets. One group of Nice Guys, their heads just... exploded. One after the other. Boom boom boom."

"Wait are you for serious?" I asked. "There're people hunting you in the woods at night?"

"As best as any of us can tell," Mr. Kohn said, "it's spec ops training. Operatives must land on the island at night, stalk us, kill us. Learn how to do it. Try out new toys.

"That's..." I looked for a word.

"Beyond fucked up," Dr. Morrison suggested.

"Alright," I conceded. "We wait until morning. I suggest we pick a house and try to get some sleep."

The first two of the little shacks we tried the door on, we found men inside who looked at us with wide-eyed fear, so we kept going. We walked through the same stone alley that the Frog Prince had gone through and out into a little cobblestone plaza, clearly modeled after a medieval European city.

In the center, Pepe le Pew stood in front of two men in brown robes and tonsures, their heads cast down to the ground in shame. Dozens looked on.

"You have failed monk model!" King Frog shouted, spittle flying from his lips.

"We have failed monk mode," the two men intoned.

"Give me your robes."

The two men took off their robes. They were naked underneath, one shivering in the cool night air.

"Masturbation is not celibacy!" King Frog shouted.

"Masturbation is not celibacy," the men intoned.

"Yeah," I said, turning to Mr. Kevin. "I see what you're saying."

"The volcels are weird," Mr. Kevin repeated.

I turned my back on the spectacle and soon we found an empty shack with bunk beds in which to sleep.

•

"Hey, wake up," a strange voice said, cutting me out from a dream about strawberry ice cream.

I was awake in an instant, my knife unsheathed and ready, pointed at... a girl.

God I wanted strawberry ice cream.

I blinked a couple times, confused. Where was I?

"I'm here to help," she said. She couldn't have been twenty years old. She was handsome, heavy-set, wearing monks' robes, and very clearly a girl. Or at least she wasn't a cis man like everyone else I'd seen on the island. I blinked again.

"So if you could put the knife down," she continued.

I sat up in bed. Around me, the others were rousing. I put the knife down.

"Pepe said he's going to kill you," she said. "He wants off the island. I overheard him talking to himself in French. He thinks no one else here understands it. His French pronunciation is so bad he's almost right."

"Okay," I said. I mean, I had no reason not to believe her. It seemed as likely as anything else.

"We've got to get out of here," the woman continued.

"Predators in the forest," Mr. Kevin said, sliding on his pants.

"Guaranteed death in New Rennes," the woman offered as a counterpoint.

Mr. Kevin seemed to consider that for a moment, then shrugged and stood up to tie his rope belt.

"What are you doing here?" Dr. Morrison asked. I was glad she did, to save me the embarrassment.

"I'm here to save you," she answered. "And... to see if you can get me off the island."

"Okay sure," Dr. Morrison said. "But what are you doing on the island at all? You're a girl and you're not even old enough to have been shipped here in the first place."

"You honestly believe they checked our IDs too carefully?" she asked.

"Wait, you mean there are other women on the island too?" I asked.

"A few cis girls slipped in, yeah. You think straight guys are the only people in this world who fell for the promise of a free woman? But no, what I lied about was my age. I was 14. Deep into the incel shit, because I was convinced I was unloveable, horrible, a monster."

"Because you were a trans girl," I suggested.

"Yeah," she said. "A fat trans girl who wasn't even willing to come out to herself, with no friends and no prospects and an abusive step-dad and the whole fucking shitty nine yards. So I said I was 18, shipped out to incel island. Four years back, they dropped hormones in one of the care packages, more trolling. A couple of us started taking them in secret. I joined up with the volcels because of the robes and the culture of modesty. Safest place on the island. But I want to get out. You can get me out."

"Of course," Dr. Morrison said. There wasn't any hesitation.

I was sure the US Army wouldn't really be excited about this new plan, but when your teammate decides to up the ante you're better off just going along with it. And besides, it was the right thing to do.

"Yeah, okay," I said. "We'll get you out. Somehow."

"We'd better hurry," she said. "They're coming for you soon."

"What's your name, kid?" I asked.

"Princess Marigold Dandelion the Sapphic," she answered.

"Mary?" I asked, hopefully. "For short?"

"Marigold," she offered.

"Fine."

We slipped out the front of the shack as quietly as we could, and with my armament and injury I was the clumsiest of us. What a shit assignment this was turning out to be.

•

Monks have ninja stars. I mean, real world monks don't, I think. But weird incel cult monks totally have ninja stars. They like to throw them.

You know what saved our lives?

The fact that ninja stars are shitty weapons.

Like, they're intended to distract and confuse but we were fucking running for our lives through a fake French village full of murderous monks who weren't allowed to touch themselves, so I wasn't going to let a cut across my cheek slow me down.

We'd barely made it out the door before we were spotted—they'd posted a guard on us. Lots of monks were there in moments, and we'd broken into an open run. At which point, we wound up in the situation with the aforementioned ninja stars and the aforementioned chase through fake France town.

When we reached the front gates, the two guards bravely walked towards us, hoping to hold us until the mob behind us caught up.

I shot one, pumped the action on my shotgun, shot the other one. Four shells left. Marigold got the gate open and we were out and into the dark forest beyond. We weren't followed.

As soon as the torchlight was behind us, I sat down on a log to catch my breath.

"We've got to keep moving, or..." Marigold started.

"Yeah, yeah, or the boogiemen will get us," I said. I took off my boot, took off the pressure bandage. The wound was worse. Of course it was worse. I poured water on it from my bottle. The last of my water.

Somewhere buried in the back of my head was proper wound treatment for a puncture wound in my foot, but I put on another pressure bandage, put on my bloody-ass sock, put on my boot, and stood up.

And fell.

I caught myself, sort of, in that I didn't fall on my face and I didn't fall on my shotgun. I just fell on my hands.

"You need help," Mr. Kevin said.

At least I didn't shrug him away. At least I did one thing right.

With my weight resting on Mr. Kevin, who I resolved to start calling just "Kevin" soon, we headed out through the darkness along a path down the mountain.

The moon came out, a waxing crescent. The best moon, if you asked my weirdo pagan dad. I've never been a nature person. Consider it my rebellion from my burnout hippie parents. I only ever went out to nature to see if I was tough enough to conquer it, never to just appreciate it. Still, it was beautiful and quiet and the stars of the southern hemisphere never get old because I never really see them. Not having a big dipper, not having a north star? That's a good feeling. The feeling of adventure. Of being far from home. The feeling that, were I to die tonight, I will have died doing something... well, not worthwhile, in this case.

I was working for the US Government which was about as evil as any empire on earth in history. So I wasn't doing something worthwhile. But it sure wasn't boring.

Sometimes "not boring" is the best you can get.

The night birds went quiet.

"Shit," I whispered. "Weapons up."

I leaned against a tree, lifted my Kel-tec, and peered through the night scope. Trees. Trees. Movement—a bird. Trees. Then...

"Mankiller Jones, as I live and breathe!"

A man strode out from the forest in a ghillie suit, with night vision goggles on and an M-4 carbine held easy in one hand. I couldn't see his face, but I knew that voice. I think I would have fired, if I hadn't seen motion in the trees behind him.

"Greg," I said.

"Well I'll be an uncle to a monkey," he said.

"Still torturing cliches and people?" I asked.

He grinned. Almost seven feet tall, white as the snow, and as rude as a winter storm.

"You're friends with the predators?" Marigold asked me, aghast.

"We used to date!" Greg said.

"I fucked you once in Germany," I corrected.

"Thick as thieves, me and Mankiller here," Greg continued.

"I thought you died on Volcano Island," I said.

"I'm too handsome to die on an island with a name as dumb as that."

"You're not too handsome to die on Incel Island," I pointed out, my shotgun still aimed.

"New Brittany," Marigold said.

"Now, now," Greg said. He raised his hand, and more figures came out from the trees. Six of them. They wore ghillie suits and night vision, but every one of them looked uncomfortable. Afraid, excited. New. No, more than new. Untrained. They held a variety of sci-fi looking weapons, but with shitty trigger discipline and they kept flagging themselves and each other with their barrels.

"You leading this bunch of... what, government scientists?" I asked. "Experimenting on these innocent creeps?"

Greg laughed. He laughed like a bear. I mean, I've never heard a bear laugh, but I've heard Greg laugh, and that's what he sounded like. Hard to explain. Might have to do with my blood loss.

"They're not scientists," Greg said.

I looked closer. Under the badly-worn ghillie suits, I saw Bermuda shorts. Pasty skin. Crocs.

"Tourists?!" I shouted. "You fucking bring tourists here? To hunt?!"

"It's good money," Greg said. "Get paid twice. Once by these wallet guys, once by the silicon valley types who want their weapons tested on live subjects."

I'd like to say I thought through my options. Or, failing that, I'd like to say I acted out of some benevolence, some desire for a just and fair world.

No, I lifted my shotgun and fired because I couldn't fucking stand myself. I couldn't stand my own complicity. I couldn't stand how similar my job was to Greg's. I couldn't stand to look at some pale, gigantic reflection of myself.

Either way, the important thing is that I shot him in the chest.

The other important thing is that he was wearing body armor. I caught him off guard. He fell back into a tree, then came up with his rifle aimed.

I ducked and rolled as bullets went overhead, and the battle was on.

The tourists were easy. Three shells left. I aimed for bellies, groins, heads. Anywhere but chests, where they probably had armor too. One of them fired some kind of incendiary grenade and the forest behind us erupted in napalm. Another freaked out, lifting his net gun to fire but shot too soon and nanofilament wire ripped Greg's arm right off at the bicep. If they hadn't been such untrained fucks, Greg would have killed us all, I'm certain of it.

Marigold drew nunchucks from her robes, because of course she did. Our Nice Guys waded in with katanas, and we made short work of the predator party.

Except Greg got away. He left his arm, but not his rifle. He was somewhere in the forest with night vision and a decade of practice putting down anyone within his reticle. I was out of ammo.

"We've got to move," I said.

"There's only one guy left," Mr. Kohn said.

"We've, really, seriously, got to move," I repeated.

Leading by example, I took off running down the path towards the beach, favoring my unwounded foot, hoping to get as far as I could before the adrenaline failed me.

Which wasn't far at all.







# Chapter Three

When last we left our stalwart heroes Mx. Mankiller Jones and Dr. Helena Morrison they were running on proverbial empty through the nighttime forest of Incel Island. Mankiller's wounded foot was only getting worse and her shotgun was out of ammo. Enemies lay in every direction. Greg, the murderous tour guide, was armed to the teeth though freshly missing an arm. Monsieur Frog, the self-styled king of the volcels, had chosen to betray his word and seek the bounty on our protagonists' heads. King Hairyrick himself, who wore the golden crown of Incel Island, was after them with a force of thousands of men. And of course, General Albion, who set them out on this fool's errand—to rescue pictures of his cock and die trying—would not be pleased if they were to survive.

Our heroes were not without support, however. Mr. Kevin and Mr. Kohn, from the Nice Guys, had fought and killed on more than one occasion to keep them safe. And most recently they'd been joined by Princess Marigold Dandelion the Sapphic, a trans woman who had been hiding as a monk in the ranks of the volcels.

Will their meager provisions and modest allies be enough for them to... Escape From Incel Island?

•

I was flat on my face, this time without the grace or the wherewithal to have caught myself.

I was delirious.

"Did you know," I asked, lying prone, dirt in my mouth, "that the ground smells like blood?"

"It's your blood, isn't it?" Dr. Morrison asked.

"And clover," I said. "I think I fell in some clover."

Mr. Kohn and Dr. Morrison got under each of my shoulders and hefted me to my feet. Forest surrounded us on three sides, but to our south was a sheer precipice. Guess it was good I tripped where I had and not five feet in the wrong direction. Inasmuch as anything could be "good" just then.

"Can you walk?" one of them asked. I couldn't even tell their voices apart.

"No," I said, after a long and careful analysis of the situation. "I cannot."

Two people, I really don't know which two, lifted me in a sitting position. I sat in their crossed arms like it was a chair and they carried me down the path between them.

"Here's what you do," I said. "You put me down somewhere comfortable, clean out my wound, then book it for the beach. Dress Marigold up as me. Get yourself and her off the island. Tell everyone the truth. Then come back and rescue me, or pick up my body and bring it home so I ain't buried surrounded by asshole straight cis dudes."

"You're being dramatic," Dr. Morrison said. Her voice was really close. She must have

been one of the people carrying me. The other one was Mr. Kohn.

"The situation is very dramatic," I countered.

As if to punctuate my point, the night sky flooded with lights. They were distant, at least. Without a word, Mr. Kevin made it up a tree next to the cliff for a better view.

"It's at the beach. Someone's... shit someone's landing a helicopter on the beach."

"The general I bet," I said. "Come to see what's taking so long."

"There are thousands of people down there," Mr. Kevin continued.

"They forming search parties?" I asked. "Splitting into individual teams?"

"No, lines. Defensive perimeter."

"Guess we're not going to the beach tonight," I said.

"I know where we can go," Marigold said. That's when I noticed she hadn't been with us. She handed out weapons. She'd gone back and looted the tourists.

"Where's that?" I asked.

"I told you there are a few women on the island," she said. "They call themselves the Sisters. I'll take you to them. It's not far."

No one offered up any better plans, so we made our way further down the path, away from the beach, back into the dark forest. Me in my quite comfortable chair of arms, my companions probably begrudging how much I weigh and how much gear I was carrying.

"How come you don't live with them in the first place?" I asked, managing to ungrit my teeth for the purpose.

"Stuck up bitches, every last one of them."

"You've got an ex who lives there, don't you?" I asked.

She didn't answer. So... yes.

Our path took us deep into the forest, cutting us off from the moonlight we'd been depending on, so Dr. Morrison used the light on my shotgun to illuminate the path. Several times, we lost our way. Each time, Marigold found it for us again after minutes of nervous searching.

I faded in and out of consciousness, and I don't remember much about our trip. I think it lasted hours, but the sun refused to rise so I might have been wrong.

I do remember coming into a clearing to see a large, cheerful log cabin built of vertical timbers—good for camouflage—with bright light coming out from every window—bad for camouflage. I remember the horrid squealing that rose up around us as we approached. I remember the wild hogs chained up around the entrance. I remember Marigold saying a word and how, like a spell, the pigs calmed down. Then that's it. I must have passed out.

•

The familiar and friendly haze of painkillers sat over my brain when I finally woke up. I was alone in a room full of bunkbeds and the sun beamed directly through a small round window onto my face.

A plate of cookies was waiting for me on the bedside table along with a note: "We're in the next room. Shout when you're up."

I shouted.

The door opened with a tremendous creak and a very small middle-aged woman came through the door. She looked cis to me, and it was hard to imagine how she could possibly have passed well enough to make it onto the island. She wore a makeshift nun's

habit.

"Good morning, Mx. Jones," she said. "I'm Sister Killingsworth. You can call me Judy."

"I'm hallucinating, yeah?"

"I don't think so."

"How... a nun..."

"Some of the sisters and I, we worried about the captives here on the island. All of God's children deserve care, love, and healing. Favors were pulled and three of us with medical experience made our way across the water in a rowboat, one midnight four years ago."

I sat up in bed and my head started to clear just a little. I could feel the pain in my foot, which was good. It meant I wasn't doped up too dangerously far.

"And?" I asked.

"And it didn't go well for us," Judy said. "We were held captive by the very people we'd come to treat. They saw us as surrogate mothers, and a great deal of these boys very much hate their mothers. We weren't abused, but neither were we safe, or free. After a few months, the incel girls rescued us. A daring daylight raid. And here we are, at the house the sisters lovingly renamed the Convent. Well, two of us are here. Sister Heath succumbed to a fever last winter."

"This island is so fucked up," I said.

The sister gave me a disapproving smile.

"Messed up," I said. It was probably the first time I'd ever corrected myself after cursing.

"Come into the living room, when you're ready," Judy said. She pointed to a plain brass and wood cane next to the bed. "Sister Heath's walking stick is available for you. And if you try the cookies, tell me what you think. They're made with pig's butter and sweetened with wild sugarcane. Nothing like what I could do at home, but I'm quite proud of them."

With that, she left me alone to my thoughts.

I'd had it right the first time: Incel Island was fucked up. The people on it were fucked up. The idea of it was fucked up. I was fucked up for being here. I tried a cookie. The cookie was fucked up.

Being alone with my thoughts wasn't working out great.

I staggered to my feet, holding my weight on the bunk bed before I took hold of the cane and hobbled out into the living room.

Tiny windows did little to light the place, and a dozen people gathered in the gloom. Kevin, Mr. Kohn, and Dr. Morrison. Marigold. Judy. Another nun, this one younger than me. Then an assortment of women, some cis, some trans.

I never know my place in groups like that, as a nonbinary person.

That's fine. It's fine that there was no place for me on the island. The only place for me on the island was on a boat, rowing away.

Oh god, injury and trauma had left me emotional. There's no room for emotion on a mission. Emotions are for afterwards.

Everyone turned to look at me when I came in.

"How long did you let me sleep?" I asked, not doing a very good job of keeping anger out of my voice. It's an easy trick, to turn your own suffering into irritability, to

externalize your pain onto other people. Not a good one. Just easy.

"It's the middle of the afternoon," Dr. Morrison said. "You've been out maybe... twelve hours?"

"Twelve hours?" I didn't shout. I'm much worse than a shouty person when I'm irritable. I let people feel judged by me in their own ways rather than making it obvious.

"You needed it," Dr. Morrison said.

"What I need to do, what we need to do, is get off of this island," I countered. "What we need to do is make a plan."

"We..." Dr. Morrison started, stumbling a little in her nervousness. "We made a plan."

I can't let people be afraid of me. Well, I can't let my allies be afraid of me. I can't let them be afraid to show initiative, to make their own decisions, to lead their own lives.

"That's great," I said. I did my best to sound like I meant it, too. "Let's hear it."

•

I didn't like the plan.

I didn't like the plan because it wasn't my plan. I didn't like the plan because it meant waiting. I didn't like the plan because it meant relying on Mr. Kohn and Kevin and three of the incel women instead of me. I didn't like the plan because my part in it accurately assessed my limited capacity.

I didn't have a better plan.

I laid prone on the roof of the cabin behind a low barrier wall with a small stack of spears next to me. The sci-fi guns were all with other people. I'd been offered a bow, but I was never obsessed with horses and knights and all that shit and I've never lived off hunted meat so what the hell do I know about archery. Stack of spears. Besides, the wood line was only twenty feet from the door, so it's not like I could have done much with the increased range.

The short version is that we were going to wait at the Convent until conditions changed. The beach was unassailable. The incels were gathered in strength around the only way off the island, waiting for us. Eventually they'd start looking for us. Then we'd ambush them, loud and messy, and hopefully it would be enough to distract the guards at the beach, whereupon we'd make our escape. We'd sneak past who knows how many angry incels and the Albion himself if he was still around. The general who would be camped out, surrounded by men who probably had honest-to-god rifles.

It wasn't fair if they were allowed to land with rifles. I'd been stuck with a damn shotgun.

Kevin had that shotgun now. Useful for intimidation even if it was out of ammunition.

I had a stack of spears.

And a plate of cookies that tasted fucking awful.

And the yard was full of wild hogs, coming and going on their long clanky chains, eating from troughs, tamed by god knows what force.

The sisters had tried to reassure me that our position was safe, that it had been three years since any men attacked the compound and that the only men who had known where it was had been hacked up and fed to the pigs.

Still, I insisted we post a guard. Better to stare endlessly at trees, overthinking every noise, than to sit inside and overthink everything else.

Around nightfall, Kevin came up to join me. He was back from his post watching the beach. He could have taken a break, but either he preferred to stay busy like I did or he preferred to be in my company. Either way, I appreciated it.

No, no feelings. Feelings are for after the mission.

He was handsome, brave, and kind. He'd made some bad decisions in his life but honestly everyone has, and with cis men especially I find it's easier to trust them once I know what skeletons they keep in their closets. I try not to judge people based on the worst decisions they've ever made, but instead by how they handle the consequences of those decisions later.

No feelings. I could just sleep with him, if we both wanted. Sex doesn't count as feelings, does it?

He squatted down next to me, a hunting compound bow held in one hand, the ugly kind of with lime green lettering on black like it was the energy drink of hunting apparatus. The arrow in his other hand was handmade and crude.

"I've got something to tell you," he said.

"Oh?" I asked. Sex doesn't count as feelings.

"It's... I don't know how to say this. I don't know how you'll take it. I want to be careful. Not say the wrong thing."

"Just spit it out," I said. Sex probably counts as feelings. Shit.

"I don't trust John," he said.

"Who's John?" I asked, completely confused by where this line of conversation had gone.

"Mr. Kohn. John. I don't trust him."

"How so?"

"I think... okay so there's this thing I've observed, since being here. Since the few of us started developing this critique of patriarchy and captivity. Most of us get it. But a couple of us... like John... I think they get it and they don't. I think they understand how captivity has poisoned them, brought out the worst in their gendered socialization, all of that. Critiques of capitalism, authority, all the good things to be critical of. But yet..."

"He still hates AFAB people," I said.

"AFAB?" Kevin asked.

"Assigned female at birth. Uh... people told by society that they're girls. Like cis women and trans men and some of us nonbinary people."

"Yeah. He hates AFAB people. I mean, doesn't hate you all. Just... blames you."

"Hates us."

"I won't say you're wrong," Kevin said. "Sure. Hates you. It came up sometimes. We'd critique authority, let's say, and he'd always bring in mother figures. Talk about how patriarchal authority is clear and can be challenged openly, but how matriarchal authority is more insidious. We'd argue with him about it, and he'd relent, but I don't know that he ever really changed his mind. He just learned how to say the right things, I think. I didn't really think about it much. I'm sorry, it just never came up as much of a risk factor, based on where we live. But last night, while you were out, he tried to flirt with one of the women here by talking about patriarchy and she wasn't into him. He didn't take it well. I saw the look on his face."

"There are woke misogynists on Incel Island," I said. "What a fucking world."

I stared into the trees for a minute while I thought that over.

"What do you think he's going to do?" I asked. "I could guess but you know him a thousand times better."

"Hopefully? Nothing. He knows that keeping you alive is his best chance to survive. But... if he decides that he doesn't think he'll survive anyway? Then... I don't know what he'll do."

"Tactically. I need to know what the possibilities are."

Kevin sighed.

"Again. Probably nothing. But if he doesn't come back to report in an hour, then he's probably planning something. Might rat us out. Bring a crew of Nice Guys around. To... not be nice."

I hefted myself up, using one of the spears, and started towards the ladder at the back of the house.

"Where are you going?" Kevin asked.

"Plans have changed."

•

It took me longer than I would have liked to find Mr. John. I'm more of an urban operative at heart. I'm used to finding people by using technology or my extensive people skills. Like holding people over the edge of buildings and asking them polite questions. I know enough bushcraft to keep myself alive, but I'm not a tracker. Not really. So I stumbled around in the dark, leaning heavily on my spear. At first I was trying to find the trail of this potential traitor—he wasn't at his post—and then when I couldn't find him, I was just trying to find my own way back.

None of the trees looked familiar. None of the animal trails looked familiar. I had two points of navigation—the bright lights on the beach and the ominous silhouette of the island's mountain.

I put the lights directly behind me and the mountain directly in front of me and started back towards what I hoped was the Convent. The painkillers started wearing off, which wasn't my favorite thing that had ever happened to me.

After a short little eternity, I saw the red glow of headlamp up ahead and limped towards it as quietly as I could.

There he was, conspiring in the thick of the forest with another four guys. The tourist web gun was tucked in the crook of his arm. All the others were armed like me, with spears. No, not like my spears. They had boar spears, with wide cross beams under the blade to stop a charging animal. Not a good sign.

I couldn't make out their words, but they had the unmistakable look of people gearing themselves up to kill and/or die. It's somewhere between vacant and determined. I probably had that expression on my own face half the time.

Odds were good that they were planning to attack the Convent. But there was a chance that they were on our side, that Mr. John had recruited some friends to help us get to the beach. You can't kill people on good odds; you've got to be reasonably certain about things like that.

Besides, I wasn't sure how I'd kill five people with a spear before they could, you know, kill me back.

I crept closer, pressing my back against the largest tree I could find, listening as well



as I could. I heard snippets.

“Femoids on the island?”

“Fucking whores.”

“What was promised to us.”

The betrayal got to me, got under my skin. I’m not quick to trust, but I’d decided to trust Mr. John. The betrayal hurt me mostly because I felt like an idiot for trusting him at all.

Injured and under-armed, my best shot was to get ahead of them and warn the sisters and defend the Convent together. Together, we could handle the five of them, maybe even without taking losses if we stayed behind cover.

They were moving slowly, still discussing their plans, and I circled them wide and got ahead of them, moving at a decent pace despite my limp. Until my wounded foot betrayed me and I stumbled and crashed onto the forest floor. A decent-sized branch cracked beneath my weight.

“What was that?” someone asked.

“Probably a hog,” another voice answered.

“The fuck it was,” John the Betrayer answered.

I pulled myself up into a crouch, spear held parallel to the ground, ready to stab up and into whoever came for me first. If I was lucky, I’d kill the first one right off and put everyone else down before anyone killed me too badly.

I took deep breaths as quietly as I could. My foot hurt so badly I almost forgot to be aware of my surroundings or my impending doom. Deep breaths.

I heard a foot fall near me and red light swept over my face. I stood up, propelling myself with my good foot, twisting my hips as I thrust. The point of my spear found a belly and kept moving up, through. A tactile sensation unlike any other. By the time I stood to my full height, Mr. Kohn was entirely impaled, the spear protruding from between his shoulder blades. He was dead, and the realization of that slowly spread throughout his body.

That made me kind of sad. I decided to blame him for making me sad.

I pried the web gun from his hands and turned. Four men with boar spears were almost on me. I fired.

The recoil far exceeded my expectations and it threw me backwards into a tree. The nanofilament looked like a spiderweb, glistening in the dim light and floated through the air. It was impossibly beautiful. It didn’t strike the incels—it passed right through them as though they were air. It left their bodies in chunks, falling to the ground in its wake.

I saw no easy way to reload the gun. I turned and booked it for the Convent, using my spear as a crutch, the strange rifle slung over my shoulder.

As soon as I cleared the trees, I turned to look behind me and saw the unmistakable form of Greg—tall as a tree, missing half an arm—in the forest. Behind him, the glint of spears. A lot of spears. He saw me looking, and he turned his back and walked back into the trees.

They weren’t going to attack yet. They wanted us to worry for a while.

That asshole.

I kept moving.

Once I was inside the Convent, I took a heavy dose of painkillers and slumped against the front wall.

"Away from the windows," I said. "Stay low. Greg's out there. He's got men with him. A lot of men."

Most everyone was inside. Only Marigold and one of the sisters were still out somewhere in the woods, watching the beach. I decided to worry about them in order to avoid worrying about myself.

"What do we do?" Dr. Morrison asked. She came and sat next to me. That was nice.

"Wait until he shows himself," I said. "Then try to kill him before he kills us."

"You're not the best at elaborate plans, are you?" Kevin asked. He sat down on the other side of me. That was nice too.

"I am not," I said. "But I'm also alive, a fact that I attribute to my simple planning."

"Is it safe in here?" Kevin asked. "He has a rifle."

"A good sized log will stop almost every bullet you try to put through it," I said. "Except maybe 50 cal, but I assume that asshole is chambered for 300 blackout. Biggest bullet you can effectively suppress. That's what I'd carry if I were stalking unsuspecting men in the forest, and I don't remember his shots being particularly loud."

"So we're safe, ish," Kevin said.

"Unless he tries to set this place on fire," Dr. Morrison said.

I liked the way she thought.

I mean, I didn't like the thought itself.

We were mildly safe unless they set the place on fire, or stormed their way past the pigs and broke down the door, or told Albion where we were, or... or...

Yeah, we weren't safe.

The group of us sat in silence for a while. Outside, night birds sang their night bird songs and frogs did that thing where they sound like goddamned everything in the world except frogs. Inside, the sisters crouched against walls, whispering to each other, holding weapons. They were afraid, sure, but they weren't panicking.

"Why'd you come here?" Kevin asked, after a while.

"I'm a spec ops mercenary," I said. "It's my job."

"There are a lot of jobs in the world," Kevin said. "Why'd you come here?"

This asshole was going to get me to open up to him. Worse, I wanted to let him. I'd been keeping shit bottled up ever since I got the briefing a week back.

"I don't have a grand epiphany to offer you," I said. "I've known for awhile it's fucked, what I do, sometimes. I took this job because I'm good at it. There're other things I'm okay at. I was a private detective for awhile, but it got old spying on women for their shitty husbands. I did adventure tour guide shit after that. That's how I met Greg actually, the first time. But fuck all those rich people, you know? Letting them be safe doing dangerous shit. So you know what I got myself hired to do? Hunt poachers in central Africa. That's cool and ethical, right? Except it's not. They shouldn't have hired an American. I made them fire me and hire a local in my place."

Outside I heard a crash and my heart leapt into my chest. I peered through the window and saw one of the hogs beside an overturned trough. It was nothing.

"So you joined the goddamned US Army?"

"What?" I asked. "No. I didn't join the Army. If you're going to do shit with questionable ethics you'd better get paid well. I freelance for private customers. I get to

pick the jobs, only take the ones that don't hurt my soul as badly. Break some rich asshole's kid out of jail in some foreign country. Kill some asshole ex-husband threatening revenge porn. Hell, or dispose of a husband's body for a wife who took care of her problem herself. Set some corporate competitor's office on fire. Whatever."

"That's more ethical? Doing the bidding of the ultra-rich?"

"Pretty much everyone is doing the bidding of the ultra-rich," I said.

"That sounds like what you tell yourself," Kevin said.

"You sound like what you tell yourself," I said, offering saltiness instead of coherent sentences.

"No excuse for me," Dr. Morrison said. "I just did it for money. Programming market is flooded. I got my PhD to try to be competitive and I still couldn't get a damn security job. I'm good at breaking into computers. US Army needed a computer broken into. They gave me money. I paid off my student loans. Now I'm about to die helping them be evil. Cool. What a fucking cool world."

"Put it on your tombstone," I offered. "Here lies Dr. Morrison. She paid off her student debt."

She stared at me.

"I'm not good at humor," I offered.

She laughed.

"Maybe our virtues outweigh our sins, maybe they don't," I said. "I only know a few things. One, I'm never working for the US military again. Two, the most likely reason for that is that Greg is going to figure out he can just set this place on fire and shoot us as we try to escape the flames. Three, that fucking sucks. That's what I know."

"So let's not wait," Dr. Morrison said. "Let's take the fight to them."

"There's a small army of entitled mostly-white cis men outside with spears and at least one rifle," I said.

"Yeah. What's your point?"

"Also I'm tired and my foot hurts."

"I'm in," Kevin said. "Fuck it."

"Yolo," one of the sisters said. It wasn't Sister Killingsworth or the other nun, unfortunately. It was one of the younger sisters. I might have gone along with the plan if it had meant I got to see a nun charge at an army screaming yolo, even if it had been the death of me.

"Wait so what's your plan then?" I asked. "Break the siege and then... run down to the beach and just try to make it to the boat?"

"You said simple plans are better," Kevin said.

"That's not a simple plan, that's not-a-plan," I countered.

"Then what do you suggest?"

"We're worried they're going to burn this place down, right?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"We beat them to it."





# Chapter Four

Things are not looking good for Mankiller Jones. No, indeed, they are not. She and her fellow mercenary, Dr. Morrison, infiltrated Incel Island to rescue data for the US Army only to discover they'd been set up. The US Army wants the two of them dead, because the US Army wants an excuse to bomb the entire island and be done with the open air prison once and for all. Unfortunately, the murderous incels of the island are all too willing to play their part in the government's schemes.

Nearly all the various power players of Incel Island are after them: King Harold Dickson, who wears the golden crown, has set out to see them dead. So has Pepe, the king of the Volcels. The Nice Guys have allied themselves with the General, who has just landed on the beach in force cutting them off from escape. Greg, the tour guide with hi-tech weapons, has a legion of angry, entitled men in the forest armed with spears. Even our hero's ally, John Kohn, recently turned on them—though he met a just fate at the tip of Mankiller's spear.

Yet Mankiller and Morrison are not alone! Nice Guy Kevin has proven true to his moniker. And the Convent of sisters who are all on the island for various and strange reasons has offered them refuge.

If only that refuge were not currently besieged. If only it were not about to be set aflame.

How, then, will our heroes ever...

Escape From Incel Island?

•

"What do we have for accelerants?" I asked, opening every box and crate and eying every piece of furniture for how quick I could smash it apart and how fast it would burn. It's fairly hard to set a log cabin on fire. Way harder than it sounds. At least, without gasoline.

"There's straw in the mattresses," Sister Killingsworth said.

"Good, that's a start. Let's get those up against the walls. Anything else?"

"Pig fat?" one of the sisters asked. "We could smear it on the walls, it might help fire spread faster."

They were adapting quickly to the idea that we were going to burn their house, laboriously constructed, to the ground. Imminent death is good for clearing the mind, sometimes.

"Black powder," the other nun, Sister Patton, said. She was nearly as tall as me, thin as a piece of taught rope.

"How the hell do you have black powder?" I asked. "And why haven't we been using it?"

"The uh... the shark... figgers..." she started saying.

"The sharkfuckers," one of the younger sisters supplied.

"They make it," Sister Patton continued. "No one on the island has the capacity to smith a good enough barrel to make use of it yet, but we've been stockpiling some just in case. We traded them knitted blankets, rope, fresh pork, whatever we can for their fish and black powder."

"I don't think I want to know who the sharkfuckers are," I said, "but they probably just saved your Convent. We didn't need to burn the place down specifically, we just needed a distraction. A huge fucking explosion is one hell of a distraction."

A rope soaked in pig fat is a very sketchy fuse, but we were able to construct twelve or so rudimentary bombs out of conch shells filled with powder and sealed with wound twine.

"This will work?" Sister Killingsworth asked.

"Probably not," I said. "You might want to stand back."

I lit a fuse, kicked open the door and stood to the side. A few rounds flew into the house. So did a spear. I threw the bomb. It didn't go off. I threw another. And another.

Everyone else threw bombs out windows and a few bombs went out the back door. None of them went off.

For long moments, all I heard was my heartbeat, the shouts of angry men, and the occasional round of suppressed gunfire.

Then the bombs went off.

Shouting became screaming, and we poured out the back door. Kevin went first and made it to the trees just as a bomb exploded off to our left.

I was next, running on painkillers, destroying my wounded foot with my recklessness.

A man tried to stop me. He was a redhead, with a thick IPA-drinker beard, and he tried to spear me first but I knocked his aside and thrust mine into his flank. I hit bone, probably hip, so I twisted the spear, pulled it out, and thrust it into him again. Again. Again.

It wasn't pleasant. But we made it into the trees, all of us, without a casualty. Better than I'd expected.

We had to keep moving, so we did. I leaned heavily on my spear, and I slowed us down, and my vision was blurry. It was all just moonlight and trees and flashlights and pain. Turns out there's a certain level of delirium where pain is a visual phenomena. Or at least there was for me.

Kevin helped me walk. I was so exhausted I didn't even try to stop him. I was so exhausted I was glad for the assistance.

I was also so exhausted that I didn't hear the pack of Nice Guys closing in on us.

I was so exhausted I wasn't even able to help. By the time I was standing upright, spear in hand, there were six freshly dead men around us.

Princess Marigold stood over them, a smoking sci-fi pistol in her hand, come out of nowhere to rescue us.

"We were tracking these guys, seeing where they were headed," Marigold said. The sister who'd been out on patrol with her, another trans woman by my read, stood next to her with a matching silver-and-red pistol.

"Turns out they were headed towards you," the other woman said.

"Sister Lucifer was the one who spotted them," Marigold said, beaming at her companion.

Sister Lucifer must be her ex.

They must not be exes anymore.

War will do strange things to your emotions and your sex drive.

God damn I wanted to fuck Kevin.

Mostly I wanted to sleep.

I sat down on a fallen log. Crashed down, really. I went to sleep.

•

I faded in and out of consciousness. The painkillers had worn off, again. The pain was a little better than it had been the day before, though. When I finally worked my eyes completely open, I realized why: someone had taken off my boots, cleaned the wound, and bandaged it. Even more so, they'd splinted my foot. That was a good idea.

Maybe I'd keep my foot if I survived this after all. I'd sort of given up hope on either of those things.

I wasn't the only one who had taken the opportunity to rest. The two nuns were keeping watch and everyone else was asleep on the ground, curled up alone or cuddled up for warmth.

Kevin was cuddled up with Dr. Morrison. I decided to not have any feelings about that. It almost worked.

We were in a tiny glade. The mountain loomed over us and seagulls flew just above the pines that surrounded us. The sunlight was heavy and thick in the morning fog. There were dead men all around us, because none of us had moved their bodies.

The whole scene was beautiful and tragic and also kind of disgusting and I wasn't sure what to make of it. Nothing to do but stare at the sky, listen to the birds, and try not to think about whether or not I was going to lose my foot.

When a few more people woke, we sat in a circle. Myself and the nuns sat on the log, everyone else sat on the ground.

We talked about what to do, though the nuns mostly stayed quiet. The beach was unassailable, Marigold and Lucifer reported. The Kingsmen and the Volcels were both there. There were actual machine gun nests, even a handful of mortars. Worse, a legion of drones. If we attacked, we wouldn't even get close.

"Maybe we're stuck," Dr. Morrison said. "Believe me, I don't want to consider it, but maybe it's true. Maybe we have to hide out on the island for awhile."

"How long?" I asked.

"Weeks, months, I don't know."

"Unacceptable," I answered, without even considering it.

"I don't see what else we can do," she answered.

"We've been trying to get off this island for years," Marigold said. "It can't be done."

"You haven't tried hard enough," I said. I hate when I know that I'm being unreasonable.

"There are a lot of bodies at the bottom of the ocean that beg to differ," she said. "A lot of people eaten by sharks, too."

"Sharks," I said. "There's something about sharks..."

"What?" Marigold asked.

"The sharkfuckers," I said. "Who are they?"

"You don't want to fuck with them," Marigold answered. A few other people in the



circle nodded.

“Those sharkfuckers are crazy,” Kevin said. “Like... they fuck sharks. It’s not just a clever name.”

“Okay, so... they have boats? Someone told me they trade fish, right? There’s another dock on the island?”

“Yeah,” Lucifer said. She had a bit of a Minnesota accent. It was cute. Marigold had her arm around her waist. “They’ve got the biggest fishing fleet on the island. But... the thing is...” she trailed off.

“But they’re crazy, I get it,” I said. “I don’t see a lot of other options. We get there, we get them to give us a boat, we row out to the platform, get on our octo, and head home.”

“What,” Lucifer asked, “the General is out there looking to kill you, and you think he’ll let you escape? You think he’d let all of us escape?”

“Well... shit.” I said. “There shouldn’t be women on this island.” I thought a little longer. “There probably shouldn’t be anyone imprisoned on this island. I bet we can get one of you out. Marigold, we promised her. She comes with, tells her story.”

“I don’t see how any of us are getting out,” Marigold said.

“I think I can handle that,” Dr. Morrison said. “That landing platform we came in through, it’s loaded to the nines, and probably the tens, with cameras. There’re people watching those cameras.”

“Yeah, soldiers,” Lucifer said. “Soldiers who want us dead.”

“Not just soldiers,” Dr. Morrison said. “There’s... see the thing is when I was in school a couple years back, this message board I was on, it... okay some people... okay, us... we hacked the video feeds. To watch the emigration.”

“To laugh at us,” Kevin said. “While we were tricked into coming to this prison.”

“Yeah. And I don’t feel guilty about it,” Dr. Morrison said. “Maybe I should, maybe I shouldn’t, but I don’t. No one believed you were going to get given a free woman but you.”

“All that’s besides the point,” I said. “Those cameras, is that message board still watching them?”

“Yeah. So we get out there, the cameras see us, the public sees us. They won’t be able to kill us. We get to go home, and we tell the US Army that if they so much as drop the tiniest little nuclear bomb on the island, we go public with everything we know.”

“We blackmail the US government?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“I like it.”

Kevin stood up, wearily. “Okay, so... to the sharkfuckers?”

“To the sharkfuckers.”

•

It’s amazing what the human mind and the human body are capable of. I’d been impressed by the volcels and their little Parisian compound, the complexity of their architecture. So I’d expected something on the same scale as that.

Oh no.

It’s amazing what the human mind and the human body are capable of. It’s terrifying, in fact.

The sharkfucker’s village was nestled into a cove on the western edge of the island.

The sun was high overhead and it glinted off of buildings the likes of which I'd never seen or imagined, buildings so odd that they skipped in and out of my memory even as I looked at them. Impossible forms, every single one. A tangled web of rope and clay and seaweed and bone. The city looked more like lace, or fungus, or a wound. I couldn't decide.

It had no center, but a few spires stuck above it all like the masts on ships and I saw people moving around through the town's rigging. Where village met the water, even the docks were surreal, built in ways I couldn't wrap my head around. The boats, thankfully, the boats were just rowboats. Regular rowboats. I mean, they were covered in bones or some shit but at least they didn't break my brain to look at. Downright mundane compared to the rest of the village.

"Fucking sharks is probably the most normal thing these people do, isn't it?" I asked. I started down the hill towards the town, leaning heavily on my spear and keeping weight off my splinted foot, a sci-fi pistol held loose in one hand.

"Yeah," Lucifer said, "that's probably true."

"They going to be happy to see us?" I asked.

"They don't care about anything else that's happening on the island," Lucifer said.

"They're above it all. Outside of it all. They don't even want to get off the island."

"What do they want?" I asked.

"To raise Dagon, an ancient and unspeakable god, from the depths. So that he can destroy the world," Lucifer said.

"You have Lovecraftians on Incel Island," I said. "I guess that doesn't surprise me."

"They're good fishers and they trade with all factions and it's been years since they captured anyone for human sacrifice so pretty much we just let them do whatever it is they want to do," Kevin said.

"We've taken you this far," Sister Killingsworth said. "I don't believe we can be of more help. Get off the island. Convince them, if nothing else, not to kill us. If you can, convince them to let their children come home."

I thanked the sisters. Marigold kissed Lucifer long and hard. The sisters left us, heading back into the forest. To rebuild? To reclaim? Who knew.

Only Marigold, Dr. Morrison, and Kevin remained with me. We kept walking.

A conch shell blew from the village as we approached. Three blasts.

"Better wait here," Marigold said, "and let them come to us."

A congregation emerged from the village, like blood pumped out from a heart. Ten men, all with tridents or glaives. Most of them were naked. Most of them were covered with scale tattoos. One, at the fore, wore a medieval breastplate and nothing else.

You can't let certain cis men be alone anywhere or they'll run around wearing a shirt and no pants. It's a weird unspoken law.

"Hail, travelers," the cock knight said. "Hail and halt."

"We uh... we come in peace?" I said.

"What business brings you to Innsmouth?"

"Of course you called this place Innsmouth," I said. I wanted to call him Sir Dick Plate but didn't have the energy.

"We're trying to help these people escape the island," Kevin said. I was shocked by his honesty. "We're hoping you'd lend us a boat."

"All things must bear a price," the pantless soldier said.

"Want a spooky sci-fi gun?" I asked. I held up the one I was holding, careful not to flag anyone with the barrel. "I can't quite figure out what the deal with it is; it shoots something different every time you pull the trigger. Lasers mostly I think?"

"Those who suffer unto death at the spire of Innsmouth, those may proclaim what path we take. Let one of you suffer, let one of you die, let one of you feed the town of Innsmouth, let one of you with your throes build the slow prayer that will raise the Old One."

"That's a no on the gun? I think it basically doesn't run out of ammo, it's pretty cool. Bet you could get a lot of people who aren't us to sacrifice if you had a gun like this."

"Only the willing will die at the spire."

"Ah hell, that might be hard," I said. I turned to my companions. "So apparently they will give us a boat if we head off to find someone to uh... get tortured to death. Willingly."

Everyone glared at me. Dr. Morrison glared the strongest.

"Okay, so I mean, yeah I expected that was a no I just thought I'd check," I said. I turned back to Captain of the Pantless Guard. "I'm afraid that's not going to work out for us. Any other options?"

One of the other men, with a thick black beard cut through with gray, whispered in the armored man's ear. They then turned to face each other and spoke for a moment in low tones.

"Fine," Sir the Dick said at last. "We'll take the gun. But we need all the boats today, you can take one out at night."

"You don't get the gun until we get the boat," I said.

"The hospitality of Innsmouth is yours, in the meantime," he said.

"Normally I'd pass on that and wait somewhere else, let's be honest," I said. I looked back over my shoulder at the foreboding forest, filled with men who wanted me dead. "But sure, yeah, we'll join you in sharkfucker town for the day."

The man glared at me. "We are not sharkfuckers," he said.

"That's not what I heard."

"That was only once," he said.

I stifled a laugh.

"We are the Eldritch Children," he pronounced, solemnly. He turned to lead us into the impossible village.

"Okay, spooky kid," I said, as we followed. I was feeling better already.

•

Up close, the village was all the more sinister. There was no inside, no outside. No clear delineation from one building to the next. Everything was one big mess of driftwood and bone and shell and clay and rock, all cacophonous and bright. Men slept in hammocks or on the ground seemingly at random. If there were private domiciles, I couldn't make them out.

No one was fucking any marine life that we saw, fortunately. Maybe our guide was right and it wasn't a regular occurrence.

We walked out to a bench overlooking the beach. At least, it was sort of a bench. Inasmuch as a lashed-together collection of whale ribs can be benchlike. The view of waves lapping against sand helped soothe my eyes after all that they'd just been through.

Sir Breastplate sat with us.

"What's your name?" I finally asked, as a seagull dive-bombed the ocean.

"High Caller Richard," he said. "I'm one of the seven High Callers of the Eldritch Children, a post I will hold until the day that I die."

"Whoa your name really is Dick," I said. He ignored that.

"How did you three end up on this island?" he asked. He clearly thought Marigold had come with us. I decided not to correct him.

"We got hired to recover some shit for the army," I said.

"Then why are you hiding from the army?" he asked.

"Who said we're..." I started. He looked at me. I thought better of underestimating him. "Turns out it was all a trap. The Army uh, they want us dead."

"Why?"

"Because they want you dead. If we die, they can blame you—not the Children, but all the men on the island—and justify bombing this place."

"Why?"

"I think they just got bored of you."

"I'm not bored of being alive. I'd rather not die for a while longer."

"Sucks being treated like an object, doesn't it?" Dr. Morrison asked.

"It does."

"Like you only matter inasmuch as you provide some kind of meaning for someone else?"

"It does."

He was oblivious to the point she was making.

"If you escape, you'll stop them from blowing up the island?" he asked.

"That's the plan."

"That's good. We'll help you get off the island. Then, when the time comes, and Dagon rises from the depths, he can destroy every bit of this world for the great harm it has caused us."

I took a deep breath, trying to figure out how to say what I was thinking.

"Always the wounded fucking victims," Dr. Morrison said, saying what I was thinking but avoiding tact. "No one would fuck me so I guess I'll destroy the entire fucking globe."

The High Caller of Pantless Men got a tear in his eye. "I wouldn't put it like that," he said.

"Hey I thought I'm supposed to be the mean one," I said to Dr. Morrison.

"I'm just fucking over it. I'm sick of being on this island. I'm sick of piece of shit cis men chasing us with spears and I'm sick of cis men feeling sorry for themselves but I'm also sick of watching prisoners turn on each other and apparently I'm already sick of this apocalypse death cult even though they're nicer to us than anyone on this godforsaken rock except for the women and the one actual capital-N Nice Guy on this whole fucking island."

Kevin blushed a little when Dr. Morrison said that.

"And I'm kind of sick of you," Dr. Morrison went on, "because you're always so stoic like shit doesn't get to you but it's so completely obvious it does. And I'm kind of sick of me, and what I'm turning into. I'm just fucking sick of this place and I can't wait until the sun sets and I get onto one of those boats and then we either die or we win. Almost

don't care which it is. Just want to row the fuck away from everything."

She clasped her hands to her chest and took deep breaths to calm herself down. Kevin put his hand on her back. So did I. Our fingers interlaced. The moment was broken by the sound of helicopter blades beating the air.

Slowly, loudly, three Boeing AH-65s came into view along the beach. Fire fell from their bellies and consumed the entire fishing fleet of Innsmouth right in front of where we sat. Napalm. Never a good time when you smell napalm.

I pointed my pistol at one of the helicopters, but Dr. Morrison brought my arm down. There was no point.

The docks were ablaze and everyone, Richard included, rushed to fight the fire.

Not us, though. The four of us sat on the bench and watched our chance to go home as it burned. As smoke poured out from our last hope, as sparks scattered across the water.

•

Neither docks nor boats survived the inferno, and it was only through the concerted effort of two hundred cultists that the village itself wasn't consumed by spreading flames.

Once the blaze was under control, we found ourselves in the center of town, around a great stone monolith, a five-sided spire built of large—dare I say cyclopean—stones. It clearly predated the incels. It was hard to imagine why soldiers would have built it either. My briefing had claimed there had been no human habitation on the island before the military.

Goddam all of it was starting to get to me. I was starting to believe the cultists.

We found ourselves around that monolith, sitting on benches of clay and shell, while each of the High Callers spoke in turn. After each gave a speech, he retreated into the crowd to listen to murmurs and talk things over with the people. A sort of chaotic, ad hoc representative democracy. Well, representative oligarchy.

Nothing they actually said made any sense, of course. High Caller Richard relayed the information we'd given him, but most of the discussion was around how this affected the Great Work. That kind of Great Work where you can hear the capital letters and wish you couldn't. More than once, fish-looking assholes looked over at us with their hungry fish-looking mouths.

They all agreed on a few central points: that Dagon would be displeased that their ability to harvest bones from the sea had been interrupted; that the entire world needed to be destroyed in revenge for the actions of the US Military; that they would not flay the "first faces" off of us interlopers in order to reveal our second, "true faces," even though it was probably our fault. I appreciated that bit of mercy. But there was significant disagreement about some of the points I personally considered very salient: should they help us escape the island; should they revenge themselves on the general. They also weren't able to reach consensus about whether or not to formalize gender-inclusive language in their tenets on the off chance one of us "girls" decided to stick around.

The sun was starting to drop low in the sky when, finally, Sir Dick Plate gave a final speech. Like, way more final of a speech than I realized.

"My good fellows," he said, his voice ringing out baritone. He looked like a sketch of

Don Quixote, I decided, with his trident as a lance. “We cannot reach consensus on matters of the utmost importance, of the utmost urgency. We have been attacked, interrupting the Great Work, and we have every reason to believe we will be attacked again. Maybe the next strike will end the Work for good. Maybe the US Army will save the world.”

There were some boos at this.

“You say that we cannot strike back because if we do, we might die, and if we die, we cannot harvest bones. That we should keep our heads low and wait for Dagon to save us. But Dagon will not come to save us!”

The jeering got louder.

“I believe you’re afraid. I believe you’re cowards. I believe you are scarcely men at all. Men would not cower, hiding from the skies, waiting for the fires to fall. Men would rise up! Men would put spear and powder to the enemy, to fight, to kill, to die, all to raise the Unknowable and Unseeable and Unspeakable from the depths so as to destroy the world!”

“Whenever I say shit like that about men I get called a misandrist,” I whispered to Dr. Morrison, “but hey whatever.”

“I am not a coward. And I will prove it to each of you. I invoke my right to force consensus. I will say to you, with my dying breath, storm the beaches! Lay waste! Slaughter! Harvest bones of the willing, harvest bones of the unwilling. Hail Dagon! Hail Victory! Let these women free of this place, so that they might fight for us, that they might keep bombs from stopping our Work. Let them be the seeds that poison the world, that brings about its ending!”

“Hail Dagon!” the crowd shouted. “Hail Victory!”

“I uh...” Kevin said. “Huh. Friends like these...”

“How can he force consensus?” I asked.

The answer unfolded in front of me. The other high callers took Richard and chained him to the base of the pillar. One drew a knife, and I wish I’d turned away. Instead I watched as they flayed him, starting with his face, while the chanting of the cultists grew louder. Soon it lost its words. Soon the howling, the screeching cries of the horrid fish men seemed to force the sun to set too early. Soon Richard died, a sacrifice, a willing sacrifice, so that we might be free.

“That was so fucking metal,” I whispered. But next to me, Dr. Morrison was crying, and Kevin was crying, and Marigold stared blankly into the horrible night sky.

•

We moved through the woods that night with only six fish men as our guard. The rest were spread out in three formations. One would attack from the front, firing arrows from the trees, hoping to draw soldiers into the forest for ambush. Another was set to charge the flank after this, but that was a feint. They would charge, throw seashells full of black powder, and withdraw. The final assault would come from the other flank. It too was a distraction. They’d attack, trying halfheartedly to capture a helicopter, while the ten of us would skirt in along the shore and, hopefully undetected, get out on a boat.

We were still counting on Dr. Morrison’s feminist nerd friends to watch the cameras and keep us safe.

“If they kill a US General, the government is going to bomb this place into oblivion,”

Kevin said, while we were waiting behind rocks a quarter of a mile from the enemy camp.

"They won't," I said. "I mean, it could happen. But the odds of two hundred cultists with tridents doing much more than... well... dying... at the hands of machine gunners are pretty low."

There weren't many actual troops on the beach, it looked like. Two helicopters, two machine gun nests. A command tent. I'd guess only twenty soldiers total. Most of the people I saw were Kingsmen and Nice Guys, armed with flails and two-headed axes and all that fucking video game bullshit. As long as we didn't let them get the drop on us, they wouldn't be a problem.

"How do we know when..." Dr. Morrison started to ask. But the answer became apparent, because the beautiful horrible hell of war broke out on the beach ahead of us. Men shouted. Men ran. Bullets flew, tracer bullets arcing across the sand. We left cover and started moving along the water, crouched low, me leaning heavily on the brass-headed cane and cursing my splinted foot.

The fighting stopped, so we stopped, dropping down on our bellies in the sand as the waves lapped around us. Not thirty seconds later, the shouting began again. This time, there were bombs. We ran. I ran slower than everyone else. Getting stabbed in the foot is fucking stupid.

A single boat sat on a jetty, closer to us than the rest of the fishing fleet. It was our boat, I realized. The one we'd come in on. We were a hundred meters out when the fighting stopped again, and we dropped to our bellies once more.

"We won't even have to get close to the command tent, the nests, any of that," Mr. Kevin said. "That's a relief."

The third wave attacked, and we ran once more. A drone swept low overhead and I shot it with the laser gun. The rotors stuttered and failed and it turned bright red before falling, steaming, into the ocean.

"Sick," I said.

Three men stood guard at the foot of the jetty. Incels. I screamed "Fuck you, move," waving my pistol, and they did. I didn't even have to kill them.

I was losing my edge.

I ran across the wood towards the rowboat, limping but refusing to slow down. So close. So fucking close.

I threw the cane in and started to unmoor when I heard clacking boots behind me and turned.

The General. Fucking General Albion.

It's strange to meet a man for the first time when you've only heard his orders relayed through someone else, then gone on to see his dick pics, then had him try to kill you, then had him come up behind you while you're trying to escape. Four soldiers flanked him, M-4s at the ready. Two drones buzzed overhead. We were done. I raised the pistol anyway.

"Wait," he said. Well, he commanded. Worse? He commanded and I obeyed. I didn't lower the gun, but his voice stopped me from pulling the trigger.

"What the fuck, man," I said. "What the fuck." Yeah, my nerve? Shattered.

"Did you get the files?" he asked.

"We got the fucking files," Dr. Morrison said.

"That's good."

"You going to kill us now or some shit?" Dr. Morrison asked.

"Why on earth would I kill you?" General Albion asked.

"Well, you know, you just spent several days hunting us after your operatives here failed to do it themselves."

"That's true," he conceded. "But somehow, despite all of it, you survived. It just doesn't seem right to kill you now. No, you're more useful alive."

"Why's that?" I asked. I liked the idea of being alive but I sure didn't like the idea of being useful to him any longer.

"Well, two women like you," he started.

"Mankiller ain't a woman," Kevin said.

"Yeah," Dr. Morrison said. "They're nonbinary."

"Two people like you," the General continued, "with firsthand experience of the worst of the island? You can tell the world what you've seen. Part of what you've seen. You came here, rescued nuclear codes—because that's what you were sent here to recover, you understand—and you'll live fat and happy as heroes forever, and we'll parade you in front of the camera every now and then."

"To justify bombing this place?" I asked. "I won't do it."

"No," the General said. "I've had a change of heart. I don't want to bomb this place. I want to send more people to it. You're going to help me do it. You're mercenaries. You do work for hire. This work I'm hiring you for now? It's not even dangerous. It's all reward, no risk."

"Okay," Dr. Morrison said.

"What?" I asked, aghast. "Morrison this place is a nightmare. No one should be stuck here ever, not even these creeps."

"We're standing right here, you know," one of the cultists said. "We can hear you."

"We'll do it," Dr. Morrison said. She winked at me.

I'd just been being dense. Compromising like this, telling him we were accepting his terms, was just a conversational form of surrender. Didn't mean I had to go through with it.

"Okay," I agreed. "Except Marigold here, she comes with us. She doesn't belong here."

"Sure, whatever you kids are into these days. None of the men though."

I looked at Kevin, and he gazed impassively at the mountain.

"On your way," Albion said. "I'll leave you to your rowing. I was never here."

With that, he turned and walked away. Only once he was halfway down the jetty did I lower my gun.

"Fucking hell," I said. "If I shoot him..."

"If you shoot him, bombs drop."

"I'm really unused to solving problems without resorting immediately to violence," I complained.

"Get in the fucking boat," Dr. Morrison said.

"I will." I turned to Kevin. "Hey Kevin I'm sorry we couldn't get you out."

"It's alright," he said. "My work is here. With these men. The ones who can be saved from themselves, I'm going to save them."

"Goddamn I wanted to fuck you," I said.



“What?”

“Uh... don’t say to women what I just said to you,” I said. “Actually probably I shouldn’t have said it either.”

“I wish you’d said something sooner,” Kevin mumbled.

“It bother you if I kiss him?” Dr. Morrison asked me.

“What?” I asked. “No. I mean, ask him.”

Dr. Morrison asked Kevin, then kissed Kevin. Then I asked Kevin and kissed Kevin. His breath was awful and he clearly wasn’t used to kissing, now or ever. Goddamn I wanted to fuck him.

“We’re not prizes and you didn’t win us by being nice,” I said.

“I know,” he said. He meant it, too.

“Any of us get a kiss too?” one of the cultists asked. “We saved you too.”

I raised my pistol, thought better of it, and kicked him into the water instead.

Marigold laughed, then climbed down into the boat, setting herself up by one of the oars.

“Get in the boat, Mankiller Jones,” Dr. Morrison ordered.

I got into the boat. Well, really, I half-collapsed into the boat. Then I forced myself upright and took a hold of one of the oars.

“Get in yourself, Dr. Morrison,” I said.

“Call me Helena,” she said. She climbed in.

The moon low on the horizon, the air full of the shouts of angry men, the water filled with terrors unknown and unknowable, we rowed away from Incel Island.

# Copyright

Escape from Incel Island

A novella by Margaret Killjoy

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